NO TIPPING, PLEASE
Mark 8:27-36
November 7, 1982

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The best commentary on Mark 8:27-36 I know is not in the field of Biblical or theological scholarship, but drama. It is a play, The Cocktail Party, written in 1949 by the late T. S. Eliot.

The play begins at a party in the London flat of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne. The characters and their relationships set the scene. Edward is involved in an affair with Celia who is also at the party. Lavinia knows about Edward's affair and has, that day, left him, and so he is entertaining without her; in fact, without knowing who exactly she has invited. It is necessary for Edward, of course, to disguise the reason for her absence which makes for strained conversation. Lavinia is having an affair with Peter, who is also at the party. Peter, however, has eyes for Celia. There are several other guests. The conversation is trite, tedious, almost obnoxious, but not untypical. As the evening wears on and the guests drift away, it becomes apparent that Edward really wants to remain married to Lavinia and, consequently, tells Celia that their affair is over.

Celia - who has invested very heavily emotionally in the affair, is understandably depressed, empty, and ends up seeing a psychiatrist who, by the way, was also at the party. She describes her feelings in terms of lostness, meaninglessness in a way which Eliot apparently meant as a commentary on modern life. Celia has looked to the affair with Edward for "salvation", that is for excitement, beauty, meaning, and direction.

She says: "...even if I find my way out of the forest, I shall be left with an inconsolable memory of the treasure I went into the forest to find... And never found, and which was not there...And perhaps is not anywhere...I want to be cured of a craving for something I cannot find and of the shame of never finding it. Can you cure me?"

The doctor tells her that she must chose her own treatment: that all he can do is "reconcile her to the human condition." She can, he advises, "avoid excessive expectations, give and take what there is to give and take, and find a husband with whom to breed children they won't understand and who won't understand them.

Celia replies that that sounds like a surrender, a betrayal of a vision of life's possibilities, which she doesn't want to forget. There must be more to it than that...

Then comes T. S. Eliot's commentary on Mark 8. The doctor tells Celia: "There is another way, if you have the courage. The first I could describe in familiar terms because you have seen it, as we all have seen it, illustrated, more or less, in lives of those about us. The second is unknown, and so requires faith - the kind of faith that issues from despair. The destination cannot be described; you will know very little until you get there; you will journey blind. But the way leads toward possession of what you have sought for in the wrong place."

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a marvelous book about the experience of living with and sharing her mother's final days in which she comments: "I must never lose sight of those other deaths which precede the final, physical death, the deaths over which we have some freedom, the death of self-will, self-indulgence, self-deception, all those self devices which, instead of making us more fully alive, make us less." (The Summer of the Great Grandmother, p. 53)

When have you been most fully alive? As you reflect on your own experiences, can you identify times when you felt most vitally human, most totally you? My guess is that you will answer by recalling times when you were thoroughly involved in some endeavor outside the perimeters of self: some project, or cause, or person, which demanded so much, called so much out of you, you didn't have time to be aware of self, much less count the cost to self. We have experienced - each of us - the existential truth of the dictum that to find life you have to lose life, in the simple denial of self implicit in having and caring for a child for instance, or running a race, or practicing the piano, or arguing a case, teaching a class, writing a report.

It remains the most profoundly radical thing Jesus ever said because it is contrary to our instinct for self preservation. It becomes revolutionary because it confronts directly a cultural motif with which we live every single day of our lives. The cult theology of America in 1982 may be described with words like profit, acquisition, accumulation, upward mobility, security. An insurance company advertisement in this week's Time Magazine captioned a picture of a luxury yacht with this: "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Higher Interest." That describes it eloquently. Our chief end is apparently to buy more things this year than we bought last year. Somehow we can't seem to connect what has been happening on Wall Street, the profits they made, and the fact that an ADC mother in Columbus can't pay her gas bill and eat. We have even come to define freedom in almost totally economic terms. Our choice of friends intentionally appears to have far more to do with our freedom to make a profit within their economics, than the freedom of their own people from oppression, hunger, disease, and ignorance.

Jesus suggested that the greatest good and therefore the greatest happiness is in giving rather than getting, letting go rather than protecting, opening one's hands rather than clutching. Jesus said you have to learn to lose life, if you want to have it.

You won't find that taken seriously in very many places in this world. Peter stumbled all over it. And yet we miss the whole point of Christianity if we don't come to terms with this teaching. In fact, if Jesus was correct, we engage in a self-inflicted limitation of our own lives, our own vitality, if we ignore it.

A person who is so afraid of getting hurt that he refuses to love another has already started to die according to Jesus.

A person too afraid of coming in last to enter the race, is already dying, by Christian criteria.

A person too concerned about job security to tell the truth is already dying.